

# 1912

Cubist collage is invented amid a set of conflicting circumstances and events: the continuing inspiration of Symbolist poetry, the rise of popular culture, and Socialist protests against the war in the Balkans.

If modernism consistently allied itself with “the shock of the new,” the form this took in poetry was expressed by Guillaume Apollinaire in the summer of 1912 as he abruptly changed the title of his forthcoming book of poems from the Symbolist-sounding *Eau de vie* to the more popularly jazzy *Alcools* and hastily wrote a new work to add to the collection. This poem, “Zone,” registered the jolt that modernity had delivered to Apollinaire by celebrating the linguistic pleasures of billboards and street signs.

Apollinaire’s announcement came at the very moment when a former literary avant-garde was transforming itself into the establishment through the newly formed magazine *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (N. R. F.) and its championing of writers such as André Gide, Paul Valéry, and most importantly—with Albert Thibaudet’s scholarly study now devoted to him—Stéphane Mallarmé. But what Apollinaire was signaling was that the barricade that Symbolism—and Mallarmé in particular—had tried to erect between newspaper journalism and poetry had now broken open. One had only to look at “Zone” to see this. “The handbills, catalogs, posters that sing out loud and clear,” it proclaims, “that’s the morning’s poetry, and for prose there are the newspapers ... tabloids lurid with police reports.”

Newspapers, which “Zone” celebrated as a source for literature, proved the turning-point for Cubism as well, particularly Picasso’s, as, in the fall of 1912, he transformed Analytical Cubism into the new medium of collage. If collage literally means “gluing,” Picasso had, of course, already begun this process earlier in the year with his *Still Life with Chair Caning*, an Analytical Cubist painting onto which he had glued a swathe of mechanically printed oilcloth. But the mere attachment of foreign matter to an unchanged pictorial conception—as in the case of the Futurist painter Gino Severini, who, in 1912, fixed real sequins onto his frenetic depictions of dancers—was quite distinct from the path Cubism was to follow once Braque introduced [1], and Picasso took up, the integration of relatively large-scale paper shapes onto the surfaces of Cubist drawings.

With this development—called *papier collé*—the entire vocabulary of Cubism suddenly changed. Gone were the little canted planes with fractured patches of modeling, sometimes attached at their corners, sometimes floating freely or gravitating toward a

section of the picture’s gridded surface. In their place now were papers of various shapes and descriptions: wallpapers, newspapers, bottle labels, musical scores, even bits of the artist’s old, discarded drawings. Overlaying each other the way papers would on a desk or work table, these sheets align themselves with the frontality of the supporting surface; and beyond signaling the surface’s frontal condition, they also declare it to be paper-thin, only as deep as the distance from the topmost sheet to the ones below it.

Visually, however, the operations of *papier collé* work against this simple literalism, as when, for instance, several papers combine to force the background sheet to read as the frontmost element by defining it—against the grain of its material position—as the surface of the leading object on the still life’s table, a wine bottle, perhaps, or a musical instrument [2]. The visual play of such a “figure-ground reversal” had also been a staple of much of Analytical Cubism. But collage now went beyond this into the declaration of a rupture with what could be called—using the semiological term for it—the “iconic” itself.

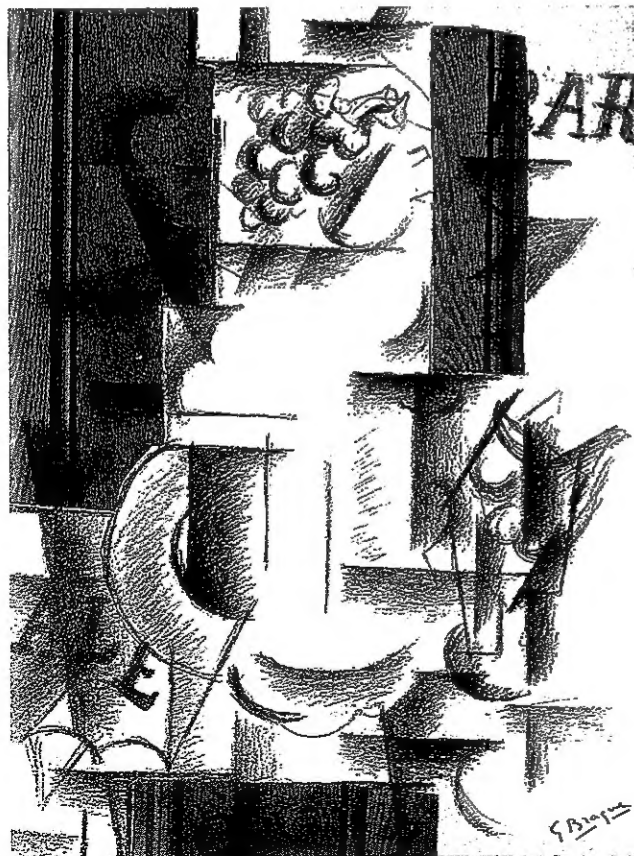
Visual representation had always presumed that its domain was the “iconic,” in the sense of the image’s possessing some level of resemblance to the thing it portrayed. A matter of “looking like,” resemblance could survive many levels of stylization and remain intact as a coherent system of representation: that square attached to that inverted triangle joined to those zigzag shapes producing, say, the visual identities of head, torso, and legs. What seemed to have nothing to do with the iconic was the domain the semiologists call “symbolic,” by which they mean the wholly arbitrary signs (because in no way resembling the referent) that make up, for example, language: the words *dog* and *cat* bearing no visible or audible connection to the meanings they represent or to the objects to which those meanings refer.

## Swept away

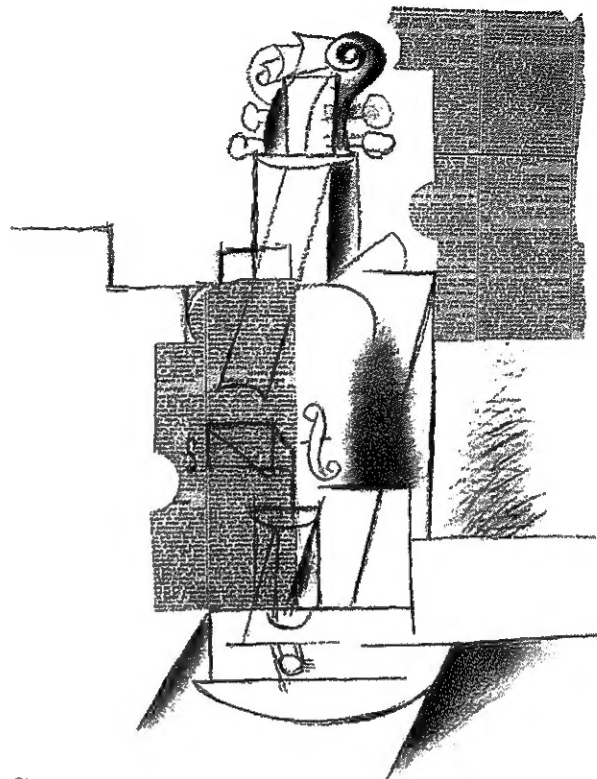
It was by adopting just this arbitrary form of the “symbolic” that Picasso’s collage declared its break with a whole system of representation based on “looking like.” The clearest example brings this about by deploying two newspaper shapes in such a way as to declare that they were cut, jigsaw-puzzle fashion, from a single

original sheet [2]. One of these fragments sits within a passage of charcoal drawing to establish the solid face of a violin, the paper's lines of type functioning as a stand-in for the grained wood of the instrument. The other, however, gravitating to the upper right of the collage, declares itself not the continuation of its "twin" but, instead, the contradictory opposite, since *this* fragment's lines of type now appear to assume the kind of broken or scumbled color through which painters have traditionally indicated light-filled atmosphere, thereby organizing the newsprint piece as a sign for "background" in relation to the violin's "figure."

▲ Using what semiologists would call a "paradigm"—a binary opposition through which each half of the pair gains its meaning by *not* signifying the other—the collage's manipulation of this pair declares that what any element in the work will mean will be entirely a function of a set of negative contrasts rather than the positive identification of "looking like." For even if the two elements are literally cut from the same cloth, the oppositional system into which they are now bound contrasts the meaning of one—opaque, frontal, objective—with that of the other—transparent, luminous, amorphous. Picasso's collage thus makes the elements of the work function according to the structural-linguistic definition of the sign itself as "relative, oppositive, and negative." In doing so, collage seems not only to have taken on the visually arbitrary con-



1 • Georges Braque, *Fruit Dish and Glass*, 1912  
Charcoal and pasted paper, 62 x 44.5 (24 7/8 x 17 1/2)



2 • Pablo Picasso, *Violin*, 1912  
Pasted paper and charcoal, 62 x 47 (24 3/4 x 18 1/2)

dition of linguistic signs but also to be participating in (or, according to the Russian-born linguist Roman Jakobson, even initiating) a revolution in Western representation that goes beyond the visual to extend to the literary, and past that into the political economy.

### Off the gold standard

For if the meaning of the arbitrary sign is established by convention rather than what might seem the natural truth of "looking like," it can, in turn, be likened to the token money of modern banking systems, the value of which is a function of law rather than a coin's "real" worth as a given measure of gold or silver or a note's redeemable relation to precious metal. Literary scholars have thus set up a parallel between naturalism as an aesthetic condition and the gold standard as an economic system in which monetary signs, like literary ones, were understood to be transparent to the reality that underwrote them.

If the point of this parallel is to prepare the literary critic for the modernist departure from the gold standard and its adoption of "token" signs—arbitrary in themselves and thus convertible to any value set by a signifying matrix or set of laws—no one effected this break with linguistic naturalism as radically or as early as did Stéphane Mallarmé, within whose poetry and prose the linguistic

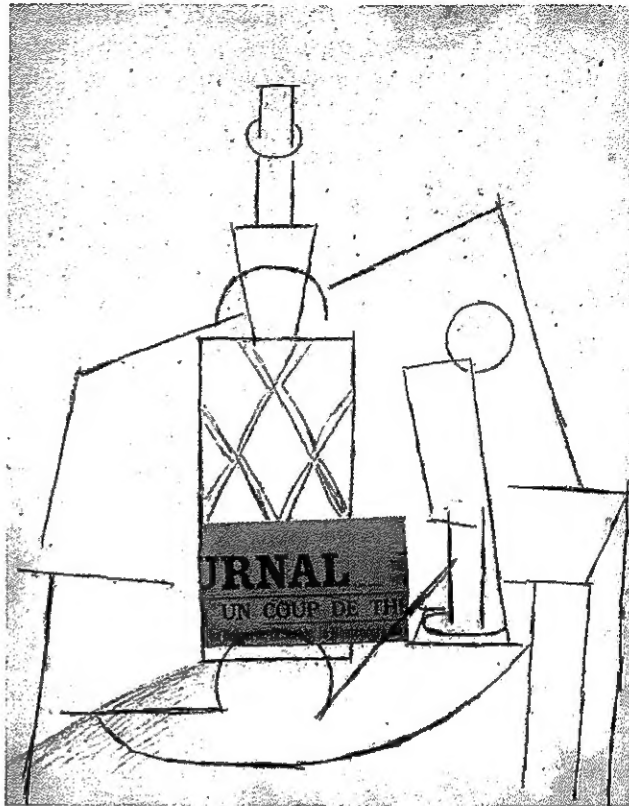
sign was treated as wildly “polysemic,” or productive of multiple—and often opposed—meanings.

Just to stay with the term *gold*, Mallarmé used it not only to explore the phenomenon of the metal and its related concepts of richness or luminosity but also to take advantage of the fact that the word in French for gold (“*or*”) is identical to the conjunction translated as “now”; it is thus productive of the kind of temporal or logical deflection of the flow of language that the poet went on to exploit, not just at the level of meaning (that is, the signified) but also at that of the material support for the sign (the signifier). Thus in the poem titled “*Or*” this element appears everywhere, both freestanding and embedded within larger signs, a signifier that sometimes folds over onto its signified—“*trésor*”—but more often one that does not—“*dehor*,” “*fantasmagorique*,” “*horizon*,” “*majoré*,” “*hors*”—seeming thereby to demonstrate that it is the very uncontrollability of the physical spread of *or* that makes it a signifier truly cut free of the gold standard of even its most shifting signified.

There is of course a paradox in using this example within the larger account of modernity—including that of Picasso’s collage—as something established by the arbitrariness of the token-money economy. For Mallarmé deploys the very marker of what token-money set out to replace, namely (outmoded) gold, to celebrate the freely circulating meaning of the new system. Yet the value he continues to accord to gold is not that of the old naturalism but rather that of the sensuous material of poetic language in which nothing is transparent to meaning without passing through the carnality of the signifier’s flesh, its visual outline, its music: /gold/ = sound; *or* = *sonore*. This was the poetic gold that Mallarmé explicitly contrasted with what he called the *numéraire*, or empty cash value, of newspaper journalism in which, in his eyes, language had reached its zero point of being a mere instrument of reporting.

### Prospecting on the fringes

The interpretation of Picasso’s collage is, within art-historical scholarship, a battleground in which various parts of the foregoing discussion are pitted against one another. For on the one hand there is the bond between Picasso and Apollinaire, the painter’s great friend and most active apologist, which would support the model of Picasso’s having a “make it new” (or, as Apollinaire called it, an *esprit nouveau*) attitude toward journalism and the newspaper—almost, as it were, throwing “the morning’s poetry” in Mallarmé’s face. Emphasizing Apollinaire’s exultation in what was modern, both in the sense of what was most ephemeral and what was most at odds with traditional forms of experience, this position would ally Picasso’s use of newsprint and other cheap papers with a willful attack on the fine-arts medium of oil painting and its drive for both permanence and compositional unity. The highly unstable condition of newsprint condemns collage from the outset to the transitory; while the procedures for laying out, pinning, and gluing *papiers collés* resemble commercial design strategies more than they do the protocols of the fine arts.



3 • Pablo Picasso, *Table with Bottle, Wine Glass, and Newspaper*, Fall–Winter 1912  
Pasted paper, charcoal, and gouache, 62 x 48 (24¾ x 18¾)

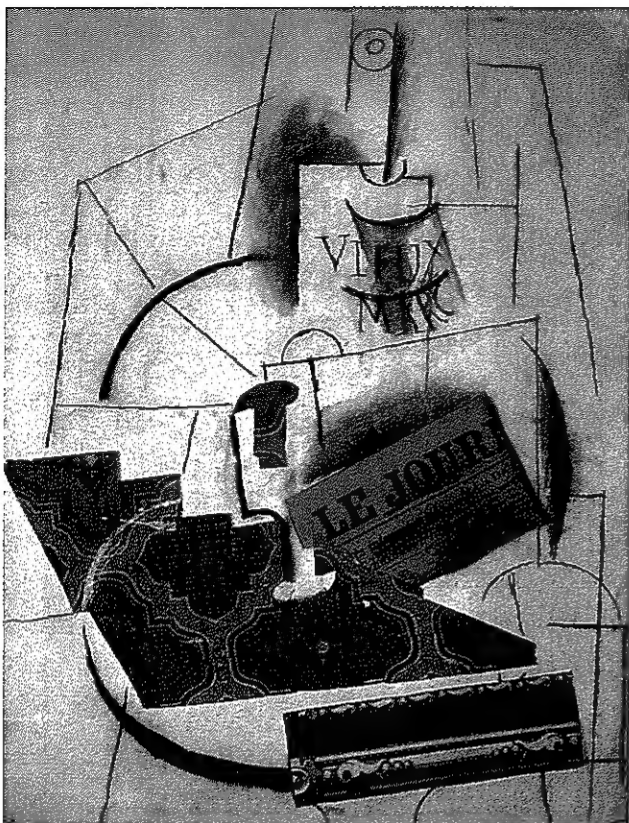
This position would also see Picasso, like Apollinaire, as being caught up in a drive to find aesthetic experience at the margins of what was socially regulated, since it was only from that place that the advanced artist could construct an image of freedom. As the art historian Thomas Crow has argued, this drive has consistently led the avant-garde toward “low” forms of entertainment and unregimented spaces (for Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec [1864–1901] this had been the twilight-zone nightclub; for Picasso, it was the working man’s café), even though, ironically, such prospecting has always ended by opening up such spaces for further socialization and commodification by the very forces the advanced artist sought to escape.

If these arguments posit Picasso’s embrace of both the “low” and the “modern” values of the newspaper, there are also those commentators who picture his reasons for exploiting this material as primarily political. Picasso, they say, cut the columns of newsprint so that we can read the articles he selected, many of which in the fall of 1912 reported on the war then raging in the Balkans. This is true, of course, at the level of the headlines—an early collage [3] presents us with “*Un Coup de Thé[âtre], La Bulgarie, La Serbie, Le Monténégro sign[ent]*” (“A Turn of Events, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro Sign”)—but also in the small type where battlefield reports are grouped around a café table that faces accounts of a social antiwar rally in Paris [4]. In giving what she sees as Picasso’s reasons for





4 • Pablo Picasso, *Glass and Bottle of Suze*, 1912  
 Pasted paper, gouache, and charcoal, 65.4 x 50.2 (25 3/4 x 19 3/4)



5 • Pablo Picasso, *Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, and Newspaper*, 1913  
Charcoal and pasted and pinned paper, 63 x 49 (24 3/4 x 19 1/4)

this, art historian Patricia Leighton has argued, variously, that he is bringing the reader/viewer into contact with a politically charged reality in the Balkans; or that he is presenting the reader/viewer with the kind of heated discussion that would be going on in a Parisian café where workers, unable to afford a newspaper subscription, would go for their daily news; or again, that Picasso is taking apart the managed cacophony of the newspaper—with its interests in serving up news as so many disjointed entertainments—and is using collage as a means of “counterdiscourse” that will have the power to rearrange the separate stories into a coherent account of capital’s manipulation of the social field.

With these propositions we have come progressively further away from the idea of collage as performing a rupture with an older naturalistic, “iconic” system of representation. For whether we imagine Picasso deploying newspaper reports to picture a faraway reality, or using them to depict people conversing in a café, or making them into a coherent ideological picture where previously there had been nothing but confusion, we still think of visual signs as connecting directly to the things in the world they are supposed to be depicting. Picasso’s only innovation would be, then, to replace his disputants with speech-balloons for their arguments as he seats them with perfect representational decorum around a more or less conventionally drawn café table. We have, that is, an example of the politically committed artist (although Picasso’s

politics during this period are themselves open to dispute), but we have lost Picasso as the artistic innovator at the level of importance to the whole history of representation with whom we were engaging at the outset.

This is where the claims of Mallarmé begin to challenge those of Apollinaire, even the Apollinaire who seemed to respond to Picasso’s collage by inventing his own fusion of the verbal and the visual in the *calligrammes* he began to fashion in 1914. For constellating written signs into graphic images, the *calligrammes* become doubly “iconic”: the letters forming the graphic shape of a pocket watch, for example, merely reinforce at the level of the visual what they express in textual form: “It’s five to noon, at last!” And if they thereby take on the graphic excitement of advertisements or product logos, the *calligrammes* nonetheless betray what is most radical in Picasso’s challenge to representation: his refusal of the unambiguous “icon” in favor of the endlessly mutational play of the “symbol.”

Like Mallarmé’s mutational play, where nothing is ever just one thing—as when signifiers divide, doubling “son or” (his or her gold) with “son or” (the sound “or” and by implication the sonority of poetry)—Picasso’s signs mutate visually by folding over onto one another to produce the oppositional pair of the paradigm. As in the earlier *Violin*, this is apparent in the *Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, and Newspaper* (5), where a toqueline shape, cut from a sheet of wallpaper, reads as *transparency* by articulating both the lip of the wine glass and its liquid contents, while below, the upside-down silhouette left by the “toque’s” excision from the sheet registers the *opacity* of the stem and base of the object, declaring itself a figure (no matter how ghostly) against the wallpaper’s tablecloth ground. The paradigm is perfectly expressed, as the signifiers—identical in shape—produce each other’s meaning, their opposition in space (right side up/upside down) echoing their semantic reversal.

If the play of visual meaning in the collages is thus mutational, the textual play mobilized by Picasso’s use of newsprint is also cut free from the fixity of any one “speaker” to whose voice, or opinion, or ideological position we might attribute it. For no sooner do we decide that Picasso has cut an item from the financial pages to denounce the exploitation of the worker, and thereby to “speak” through the means of this clipping, than we have to remember that Apollinaire, from his perch as writer for a half-fraudulent financial magazine, was famous for handing out spurious advice about the stock market and that the voice the collage plants here could just as easily be “his.”

Picasso had, indeed, let Mallarmé himself speak from the surfaces of various of these collages, as when “*Au Bon Marché*” doubles a voice like Fernande Olivier’s (Picasso’s ex-mistress)—speaking of white sales and a trousseau—with the various voices that Mallarmé used as pen-names in his elegant fashion magazine *La Dernière Mode*, or when the headline *Un coup de thé* sounds the title of Mallarmé’s most radical poem: “*Un coup de dés*.”

Much has been made of Picasso’s recourse to the models of distortion and simplification offered by African tribal art. Kahnweiler

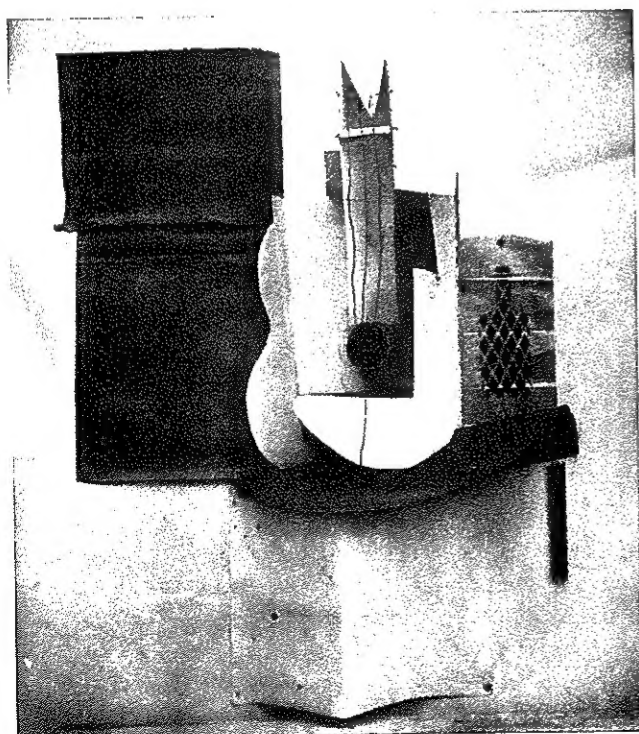


insisted, however, that it was a particular mask in Picasso's collection that "opened these painters' eyes." This mask from the Ivory Coast tribe called Grebo is a collection of "paradigms."

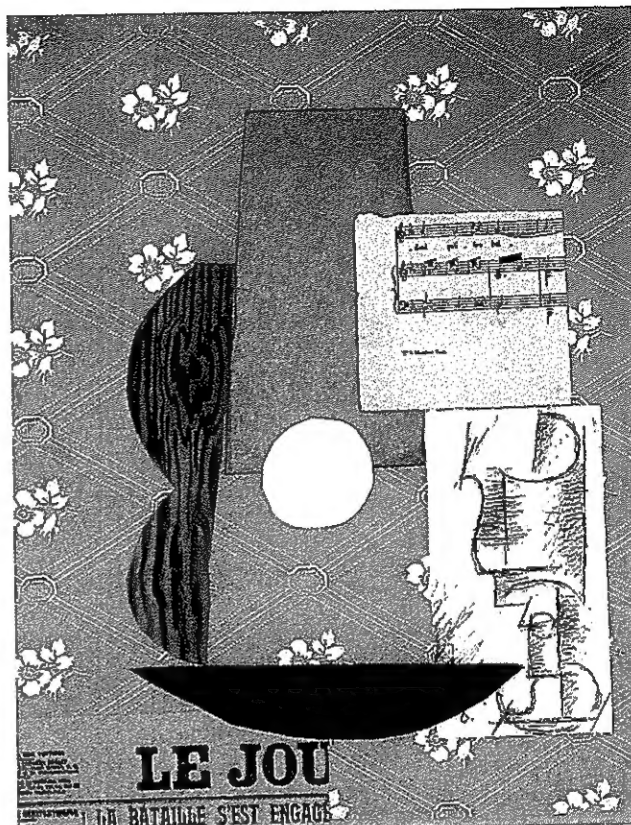
Picasso's own venture into constructed sculpture shows the effect of the Grebo example. Made of sheet metal, string, and wire, his *Guitar* of 1912 [6] establishes the instrument's shape through a single plane of metal from which the sound-hole projects, much like the eyes of the Grebo mask. Each plane hovers against the relief-plane as figure against ground, a form of paradigm which the earlier *Violin* had so brilliantly explored. The earliest collage to reflect the lesson of the Grebo mask is *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass* [7], in which each collage piece reads as hovering against the flat sheet of the background, the black crescent of the guitar's lowest edge doubling as its shadow cast on the supporting table; its sound-hole seeming to project as a solid tube in front of the instrument's body.

#### FURTHER READING

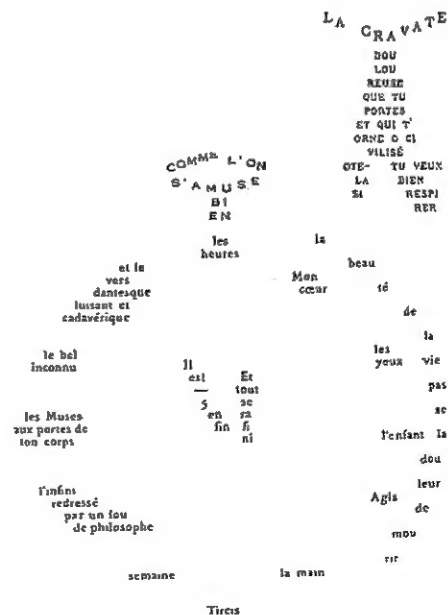
Yve-Alain Bois, "Kahnweiler's Lesson", *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990)  
Yve-Alain Bois, "The Semiology of Cubism," in Lynn Zelevansky (ed.), *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992)  
Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture," in Serge Guilbaut, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and David Solkin (eds), *Modernism and Modernity* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983)  
Rosalind Krauss, *The Picasso Papers* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998)  
Patricia Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989)  
Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1960, revised 1977)



6 • Construction mounted in Picasso's studio at 5 bis, rue Schoelcher, 1913  
Includes cardboard maquette for *Guitar* (destroyed)



7 • Pablo Picasso, *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass*, Fall 1912  
Pasted paper, gouache, and charcoal, 47.9 x 36.5 (18 7/8 x 14 1/4)



8 • Guillaume Apollinaire, "La Cravate et la montre," 1914  
From *Calligrammes: Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre, 1913-16, Part I: Ondes*, 1925